

MONTECITO

MAGAZINE



R. Robinson





T. Robinson, 2014

Rob Robinson – Builder, Artisan, Designer, Artist

Transforming Ideas Into Reality

Story by Cheryl Crabtree • Art by Rob Robinson and Mildred Bryant Brooks

Rob Robinson was nearly 50 when he attended a plein air painting class and placed his first strokes on canvas. Since then, he's devoted nearly all his spare time to painting and has produced a vast array of artwork in just 18 years. Although he picked up painting relatively late in life, art and working with his hands has always been part of his identity.

"All my life I've been drawn to actualizing vision, making things from nothing, giving an idea or inspiration substance and form," he states.

This creative hands-on, can-do approach to life has always come naturally to Rob—a product of his genetic makeup, nurtured by his upbringing in a wild and wonderful outdoor environment.

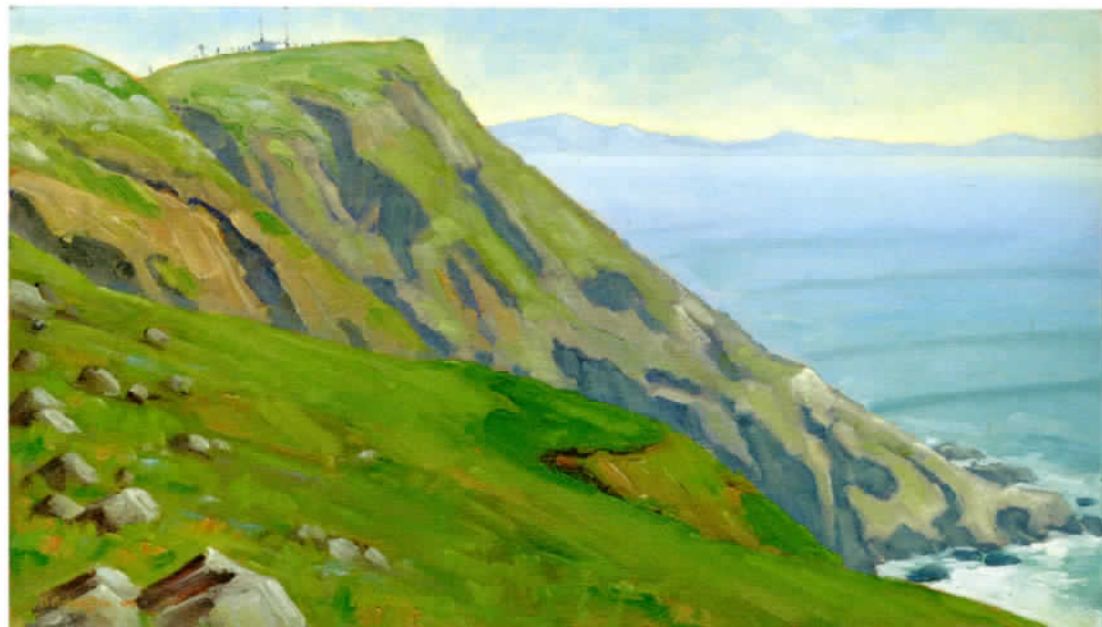
Rob's father, Frank Robinson (1923–2004) was a charismatic, highly respected Santa Barbara architect. Well-known Montecito architect Jeff Shelton worked for Frank for a couple of years after earn-

ing his architecture degree. "Frank was my mentor—my true inspiration was Frank and things he built on Mountain Drive." Jeff explains that Frank specialized in adobe construction. "Neosalvage is what he called his style. He wasn't splashy. He'd never build someone's status and often said, 'I want to build a home for people's families.' He was a brilliant architect, fantastic in math. He was very prac-

Left – Rob Robinson painting this issue's cover at the Cold Spring Aloes garden.

Above – *Paradise Found*—Santa Barbara Channel Islands, painting by Rob Robinson.

Rob painted this scene from Kinton Point on Santa Cruz Island, looking west toward Santa Rosa Island.



Into Drakes Bay, Point Reyes, painting by Rob Robinson. Rob climbed up a steep bluff to capture the vista from Point Reyes Lighthouse into Drakes Bay in Northern California. "It was on the edge, but a thrilling place to paint."

tical, very sensible. He was also very genuine—just a jewel. I think about him every day."

He met his future wife, Margaret "Peggy" Brooks, while studying at the Santa Barbara College of the University of California campus on the Riviera. Frank and Peggy were living on a boat in the Santa Barbara Harbor when their first child, Rob, arrived in 1950. A year later, they moved up to the Mountain Drive community, a bohemian enclave for artistic, creative types in the hills of Montecito. Here they built their own home and raised Rob and four more children: Maia, Tamar, Rima and Louis.

Rob thrived in this close-knit community environment, spending much of his childhood building forts in trees and underground, and foraging the canyons and mountains alongside their home. "Growing up, everyone helped build each other's houses, walls, pools—whatever we needed. We were always welcome in everyone's homes. Lots of artists and teachers lived there, and arts were a part of the culture. We walked to Cold Spring School and connected with the natural world along the way."

Rob's sister Maia says, "As children, we were surrounded by the earth, the chaparral and the oaks. We built our house with adobe bricks that we made from the soil on our property."

Frank Robinson nurtured his children's design and building skills by including them in projects. "Our father took us to his jobs on occasion, and we earned a little bit of cash picking up nails and doing general job cleanup," recalls Maia. "We all learned perspective and balance through his design renderings. He designed two of the homes that my husband and I built and helped Rob to design three homes that he built on Mountain Drive."

Rob says his father also taught him a valuable lesson that has served him well throughout his life. "When there was something you had to do or wanted to do, he would say 'make a decision you're going to do it, and then make it happen.'" Rob vividly recalls a time when he was about ten years old and his father gave him the chore of chopping a large pile of wood. "I'll do my best," said young Rob, to which Frank replied, "No, you don't understand, this isn't about doing your best, it's about getting it done." Rob says he didn't understand the sage advice at the time. "In fact, I was somewhat perplexed, but later realized the strength and results gained in sincerely committing to something."

Sister Maia says, "I think the people in Rob's life and the physical environment he was raised in are a big part of the basis for his paintings and for the emotion that comes through in his work. Mountain Drive was pretty much uncharted territory when we were kids, as far as a place to live, and it could be very rough but also very freeing, with lots of room to create your own space."

Maia adds that their mother, Peggy, also influenced their connections with the arts and nature. "Our mother gave us our love of music and plant life. She was a botanist and was endlessly curious about all of our native plants. We spent many hours hiking the trails and blazing new ones in the hills above Santa Barbara. It fostered an intimate knowledge of the area."



Mildred Bryant Brooks (1901 – 1995)

Rob Robinson's grandmother, Mildred Bryant Brooks, known as "Honey" to the family, was one of the nation's most lauded etchers, best known for her detailed representations of trees and California landscapes.

Mildred first learned to etch while at USC (1920–1925) and developed a passion for the art form. According to *Emerging From The Shadows, A Survey of Women Artists Working in California, 1860 – 1960* by Maurine St. Gaudens, "In 1933, she made a noteworthy advance when she received from the United States government, under the Public Works of Art (PWAP), a commission for six copper-plate engravings; fifty prints were to be made for each, for a total of 300."

By the mid-1930s Mildred's reputation had traveled across the nation and around the world.

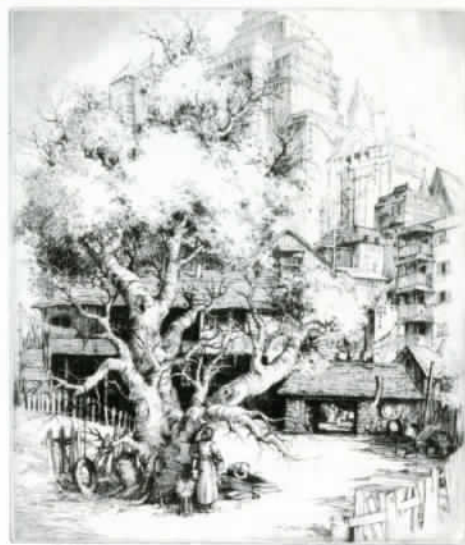
According to Jackie Lockington in a biography, *Mildred Bryant Brooks*, "Her artistic skill as an etcher, coupled with her technical skills as a printmaker, made her extremely unique in the art world." ♦

Rima says that both Frank and Peggy were singers and that there was always music in the home. "We played records and mom was always practicing. We'd always sing while riding in cars. Rob played congas and guitars, and Maia, Tamar and I all continue to sing."

Peggy also passed on serious artistic genes to her children. Her mother was Mildred Bryant Brooks, a prominent etcher of the early 1900s who lived in Pasadena. The grandchildren called her "Honey."

Rob says that, although he didn't know it at the time, he learned a lot from his grandmother. "She gave me a sensibility of composition in art, a general aesthetic. She was always talking about it, rearranging things all over her home, referring to the careful placement of things next to each other and the space they're in."

Maia also credits Honey as an inspiration and



Top, left – Mildred produced nearly all her prints on a 250-year-old German printing press in her living room. Top, right – One of Mildred's few oil paintings.

Above – Mildred's etching, *The Last Tree*, depicts skyscrapers overtaking trees and small living spaces.

great artistic role model. "My grandmother was an amazing influence in our lives. She would take us, two at a time, for two weeks every summer. She was an interior designer and a very accomplished artist. She painted wall murals of the trees that surround us in California, as well as her etchings that were very detailed California landscapes. Her use of color also keyed to the California landscape. She took us to view some of her clients' homes, to the Huntington Library and Gardens and the Arboretum. Those places, along with her home, influenced us in the importance of the painter's palette and for a love of art."

As a teenager and young adult, Rob continued to visualize ideas and make them happen. He made surfboards, worked with leather and, after graduating from Santa Barbara High School, left the country to spend six months surfing in Australia, mak-



ing sandals to pay expenses along the way. That trip led to many others, including one that lasted 15 months chasing winter surf around the world.

Rob's travels enabled him to observe and interact with environments and peoples of all types. "I got the travel bug pretty bad," he recalls. He says the extended trip made a big impression on him. "I learned at a very early age how easy it was to travel. All I had to do was decide where I was going and make it happen." Rob adds that he was also exposed to different cultures and belief systems. "My travels gave me a deeper appreciation of people in general. I saw that truth was often in the eye of the beholder and began to see the energy link between humanity and the world. We're not all that far apart."

Returning home, Rob focused on carpentry and designed and built several homes. "It became a pattern," says Rob of his life in Santa Barbara and as a world traveler. "I'd come back home broke, work, save money, then leave."

He started several businesses that grew from simple ideas into companies with lives of their own. He crafted stained glass artworks and founded Clear Light Studios. He started a company that made bags for surfboards and skateboards (Robinak Packs).

Rob, along with his friend Rick Scott, founded Solar West Electric, one of the first companies in the U.S. to sell solar generator systems. "The Mountain Drive home I built for my family in the early 1980s was one of the first solar electric homes in

the nation," states Rob. "We sold the company in 1996 when Reagan put an end to solar tax credits."

Rob's travel pattern changed, however, after he married his first wife Trace and welcomed daughter Minka and, later, son Frankie into the world. Rob needed to stay closer to home. "So I started playing golf instead of chasing surf."

Rob discovered, however, that it was often difficult to get tee times at popular golf courses. "I got the idea to build a public golf course and formed a limited partnership," Rob, as its general partner, fought hard to make his dream—Rancho San Marcos, a golf course on Highway 154 north of Santa Barbara—a reality.

"It cost \$17 million and it took 12 years to plan, get the approvals, defend them in the courts and build it," Rancho San Marcos opened in 1997 and was voted one of the "Top Ten New Golf Courses You Can Play" by *Golf Magazine*. In 2001 the partnership was forced to sell its interest in the golf course. "It was a tough end to 15 years of work, but I'm proud of the product," confides Rob.

Rob returned to work in the solar power industry and began to reinvent his life once again. "That was in the early 2000s," says Rob. "I'd been a fan of plein air art since I was in my twenties and collected art over the years. Although I collected art, I'd painted only a couple of times. One day, I saw Michael Drury [a well-known local painter and teacher] downtown. I teased him—'Michael, one



PHOTO COURTESY ROB ROBINSON

Left – Forney's Cove to Black Point, Santa Cruz Island, painting by Rob Robinson. The view is from a cliff at the very tip of the island's northwest corner. "This is one of my favorite paintings," says Rob. "It's an absolutely beautiful place to paint."

Above – Allison Jaqua and Rob Robinson on the pier at Prisoners Harbor during their trip to Santa Cruz Island in 2007, just after they got engaged on the island.

of these days I'm going to take your class.' He replied, 'Rob, it's tomorrow at 1 p.m. Come on down, it'll save your life.' And it kind of did." After that first session at the Carpinteria Bluffs near the Tar Pits, Rob experienced newfound joy and purpose. "I absolutely loved it," he recalls, and immediately Rob went shopping for art supplies.

"Plein air painting changed the way I saw the world and was a great stress reliever away from the hustle-bustle of business and modern life. Except for the time with family, it has ever since been my greatest pleasure to stand on a blufftop overlooking the sea or down a simple path and quietly observe, be alive in the scene and try to capture its quiet volume, sense of light, space and simple beauty. Sometimes it's a struggle and sometimes not, but in the end, there's always been a feeling that the time was well spent and often I've left with something to share."

Today Rob paints on weekends, vacations and holidays, often tagging along with his wife, Allison, a cultural anthropology graduate student in a PhD program at UCSB.

"Rob and I met over winemaking," says Allison. (Rob and several friends had revived a longtime Mountain Drive tradition of making their own wines.) "My sister and her then-husband asked Rob to come over and test-taste their wine still in the barrel. I happened to be there on that day, and we had a great conversation. Later Rob told my sister to 'invite all your friends and family when



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you bottle.' The day we bottled was really the day we connected, and he asked me for my phone number. I had mentioned to my sister that I thought Rob was pretty cool, and she tipped me off a few weeks later that he would be at a Mountain Drive birthday party that night. I went and ran into Rob again, and we have been together ever since."

Allison specializes in Chumash history and culture, and Rob often tags along with her on research trips to the Channel Islands and other locations.

"Santa Cruz Island is my favorite place to paint," says Rob. "I absolutely love the Channel Islands. That's what brought Allison and I together. I was able to go out with her class groups as their chef, and in my free time, I would explore and paint the island."

Allison adds that "the nice thing about our relationship is that we both love the outdoors so no matter where he goes to paint, there is always some 'kicking around' that I can do. No matter where we are, he's usually painting and I'm hiking around bird watching or exploring the seashore, so we often travel to those places where Rob can paint and I can wander."

Oak Group artist John Comer has also painted and wandered with Rob. He says he first met Rob in the late sixties, surfing almost every day at Hammonds, Rincon and Hollister Ranch, then started painting together in the late 1990s in Santa Barbara and surrounding areas. "In the summer of 2006, we had a memorable trip painting on Santa Cruz island for almost a week," Comer recalls. "We would get dropped off on a high ridge overlooking the expansive view on the south side of the island. We painted all morning and in the midday heat, we would hide under manzanita bushes and then paint again in the afternoons. We had a particularly great painting day above Blue Banks with fog all day and then a clearing wind. I was forced to start all over again because the shadows were now so strong, but Robby kept working on the subtle effects of the fog drifting in on the cliffs in waves and fully captured the feeling and scope of the landscape we faced."

Comer adds that "as a native, Robbie knows Santa Barbara in a deep historical context, past and present. This understanding, combined with his surfer's knowledge of weather and time of year, puts his work on another level as does his concise, clear approach. Like any of us landscape painters, his work is constantly evolving with ever-strengthening nuances of color and composition. I always look forward to seeing what he is working on next." ♦

Rob's art can be seen in the Faulkner East Gallery at the downtown branch of the Santa Barbara Library during May 2017.

Rob's website: RobRobinsonArt.com

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